Kissed or Tortured
The Cats of France

Cat Man (Booklet's)

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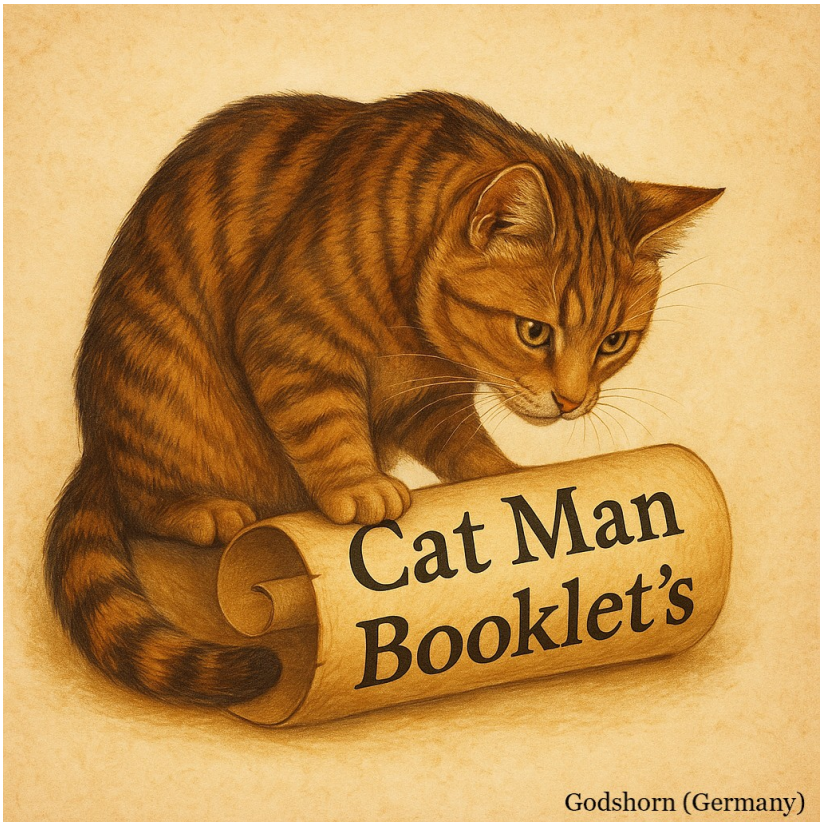

RUE
DU CHAT
QUI PECHE

Kissed or Tortured
The Cats of France

Quand Margot dégrafait son corsage
Pour donner la gougoutte à son chat
Tous les gars, tous les gars du village
Etaient là, la la la la la la
Etaient là, la la la la la
Et Margot qui était simple et très sage
Présumait qu' c'était pour voir son chat
Qu' tous les gars, tous les gars du village
Etaient là, la la la la la la
Etaient là, la la la la la.

(Georges Brassens)

(Translation at the end of the text)

Only in France could such an intimate and uncomplicated form of affection exist. "Brave Margot," the young shepherdess in Georges Brassens' chanson, found a tiny kitten in the grass that had lost its mother. She pressed it tenderly to her chest, and the kitten accepted Margot —"Margoton"—as its new mother and began to nurse. Moved by the little creature, "brave Margot" let it happen and adopted her.

"Le chat, la chatte et le chaton" — that is the French name for the feline family, irresistible and charming as everywhere in the world.

Yet at the same time, they possess a distinctly French character. When a Frenchman says “le chat,” the short word—barely formed before it escapes the lips—already carries, with its almost incantatory “sch-,” a hint of the elusive nature and mannerisms of our mysterious and ever-surprising four-legged companion. In France, anything that shimmers or glitters restlessly is described as “chatoyant.”

France’s intellectual and emotional ties to the cat are manifold. The cat has long held an unshakable place among artists and scholars, admirers of grace and elegance, and simple animal lovers. Indeed, one encounters the cat everywhere: in the capital as frequently as in the countryside.

Who has not felt that familiar moment of surprise while strolling along the Parisian boulevards, eyes wandering here and there in search of accidental sparks of charm, only to pause before an antiquarian shop—perhaps on the Quai Voltaire, near the Seine—and notice, among the displayed treasures, a cat? But no—it is not porcelain. A real, living cat lies there among fans and vases, dozing away the afternoon with half-closed lids, perfectly in harmony with the refined objects of luxury and good taste.

Traces from Early Times

The cat submits to no imposed will. It does only what seems reasonable to itself. This alone has earned it much sympathy in France. In the allegorical books of the Revolution, the cat appears as a symbol of liberation. Yet time itself—and the cultural and social atmosphere of the country—had to mature before the cat finally gained the recognition it deserved. Though sympathy and appreciation are now certain, this was sadly not always the case. Let us look back.

Thanks to archaeological excavations—today conducted systematically and thoroughly, forming the basis of cultural-historical research—the origins of the French cat are no longer a mystery. It would be an act of scholarly stubbornness to attempt to fix an exact date for its first appearance. But one thing is clear: the cat reached the land, like many other cultural imports, after Caesar's conquest, brought to Gaul by the Roman victors. A cat skeleton uncovered in the ruins of the Gallo-Roman villa of Montmaurin was conclusively identified by specialists as a domestic cat.

In the first centuries after Christ, it must have appeared only sporadically. The sympathy extended to this foreign newcomer was uneven at best. From southern France, we have customs reminiscent—if distantly—of Egyptian reverence. In Aix-en-Provence in the 10th century, people dressed the most beautiful tomcat as an infant and displayed him on a sumptuous chair in the center of town for all to admire.

Every knee bent before him; a thousand hands scattered flowers and vine leaves. But this happiness was short-lived. On St. John's Day—such were the contradictions of the times—the honored tomcat was locked in a wicker basket together with other cats and burned on a pyre. The bishop and his priests swung censers, blessed the city, and banished the devil. After the burning, the entire crowd marched through the streets singing psalms.

This custom arose from the belief that on the night before St. John's Day, all cats took part in the witches' sabbath and returned to town "infected" with evil intentions. This superstition persisted in France into much later times. In Metz, such public cat burnings were celebrated as popular festivals well into the last century. The more pitifully the tormented cats screamed in the basket, the louder the rabble cheered. In Ypres in West Flanders, the same witch- and cat-"punishment" was practiced by throwing the helpless animals from high towers onto the streets below. This custom was not banned until 1818.

Yet even in earlier times, the qualities of the cat did not remain unnoticed. In the museum of Bordeaux stands a tombstone from Gallo-Roman times depicting a girl holding a cat in her arms. According to the custom of the time, a child's favorite toy was placed in its grave and depicted on the stone. Likewise, the hagiographies—whose illustrations consistently show Saint Yves, patron saint of lawyers, accompanied by a cat—prove that people recognized the animal's keen intelligence early on.

The animal world exerted a strange fascination on the people of the Carolingian and Romanesque eras. The

many bestiaries, along with the sculptures adorning facades and columns of the great cathedrals, testify to this abundant, exuberant imagination. Curiously, however, we find elephants—animals that few artists could ever have seen—far more often than domestic cats.

Imagination often produced strange creatures: fabulous beasts such as unicorns, and even horned cats. An old legend from Brittany recounts such beings: Once, so the tale goes, cats possessed horns, while oxen and cows had none. A fisherman, returning home one evening with his catch on an ox cart, came upon a cross around which a group of cats was dancing. When the cart approached, the cats stopped their dance, surrounded the cart, and begged for fish. The fisherman agreed to give them his entire haul if they would give him their horns in return. The cats placed all their horns on the cart until it overflowed. The fisherman fitted two horns on each of his oxen, and later did the same for his cows at home. The remaining horns he sold to his neighbors. Since then, oxen and cows have horns—and cats do not.

The absence of the cat beside the dog, horse, sheep, and fish in Romanesque art is striking. The few surviving depictions may be considered exceptions proving the rule. On the tower of Saint-Hilaire in Poitiers, two cats are shown facing each other with gracefully raised tails. On the church of Saint-Pierre in Parthenay-le-Vieux, an entire frieze of cat heads appears.

Most remarkable is a cat licking its paw on the apse of the famed Romanesque church of Aulnay (11th century).

Only with the Gothic period did the cat appear more frequently in chronicles and art. One famous depiction on a pillar of the monastic cathedral of Tarragona shows a procession of rats attending the funeral of a cat. The image symbolizes the covert wish of serfs to see their lords dead.

For Cats, the Middle Ages Were Dark

More and more attention was given to the cat, but not to its benefit. In a craftsman's manual from 1268, domestic cats are called "fire cats." Why this name? Following the question leads us to a bloody tragedy. In the Middle Ages, the cat seemed good for only one thing: it could be tormented for amusement. By the hundreds, by the thousands, cats met their deaths under cruel torture in flames. Hence the name "fire cats."

To understand this grim chapter, we must look further back. The way people thought and perceived the world in the High Middle Ages differs greatly from our own. Today we regard the world and its objects as neutral phenomena. Back then, everything perceptible was seen as a sign pointing to something spiritual. The eagle represented wisdom and elevated thought, while the lion stood for strength and loyalty. A forest symbolized the dark and dangerous aspects of human life, and the numbers three and seven embodied all that was complete and perfect.

But what misunderstanding caused the cat to become, for centuries, a symbol of hell and demons, a bearer of all things evil? Whenever we find it in depictions from that period—such as in the carvings of choir stalls—it is not portrayed out of affection. Rather, alongside apes and fauns, the cat symbolized the demonic temptations that distracted monks from prayer and meditation—temptations deemed worthy of eradication.

In 1323, according to the Chronicle of Saint-Denis, residents of Château-Laudon heard pitiful screams coming from underground. Startled, then curious, they began to dig and eventually unearthed a wooden box containing a black cat that had been buried alive. During the many interrogations and trials that followed, no one expressed outrage over the cruelty. Instead, the accusation focused on the abbot of Cîteaux who had buried the cat, claiming he had used magic and the help of the devil to recover stolen property. For both judge and citizen, the black cat could only be an instrument of the devil—or the devil himself. And who would feel pity for such an associate of witches and sorcerers? Under this logic, all acts that harmed "evil," including the extermination of cats, seemed justified.

This is why cat burnings were often part of public festivities, as in Aix-en-Provence on St. John's Day. In Paris, these fires—especially under the Walloon regime—became popular entertainments cherished by both citizens and the king. The refinements with which these gruesome spectacles were prepared, and the ever-new tortures invented, are chilling.

Cats were tied in sacks and hung from trees over blazing fires. Or they were trapped within a circle of burning wood, forced to climb a central stake, where they suffocated in the smoke before falling back into the flames. Historians confirm that King Charles IX had a special fondness for these events, which began with music and cannon fire and ended with a banquet and court ball.

Receipts from 1573 still survive, showing that Lucas Pommereux of Paris was paid 100 sols parisis “for supplying the required cats for the St. John’s fire.”

All the more moving is the pure-hearted and courageous gesture of the nearly four-year-old Louis XIII, who in 1604 interrupted the “celebration” in terror and pleaded for the cats until the king granted his request.

Yet these cruel amusements continued well into modern times. The irony is bitter: people were punishing themselves. The Black Death, which repeatedly ravaged the land, spread all the more because the dwindling number of cats could no longer keep rat populations in check.

Opinions differ on the origins of the St. John’s fire and the catastrophic entanglement of cats within this tradition. According to the 12th-century theologian Jean Beleth, the custom arose from burning the bones of dead animals to prevent infection. Bishop Durand, however, believed the practice connected to the blasphemy of pagan Turks, who had burned the bones of John the Baptist. In the flames, all pagans and blasphemers—and cats were counted among them—were to perish.

In what terrible blindness must that era have been trapped, that kings and emperors found delight in such cruelty and even considered it an honor to be celebrated by these spectacles? When Charles V and his son Philip, Prince of Castile, visited Brussels, a notorious “cat concert” was staged in their honor. The expression “cat music” supposedly originated here.

In a colorful parade, a bear was displayed playing an organ—an organ with no pipes. Instead, twenty cats enclosed in wooden boxes formed the “registers.” Their tails protruded through holes and were tied to the keys and stops. When the bear, following its whims, struck the keys, it pulled on the cats’ tails, producing a chorus of agonized meows.

Fortunately, these dark times lie behind us. But we must ask: after centuries of hatred and persecution, trickery and torment, did the cat not learn to become wary and elusive, developing the very characteristics we still see today—never entirely predictable?

Some trace of that old contempt must have survived into the 19th century, when the voice of Chateaubriand rose in protest. As ambassador in Rome, he inherited Micetto, the famed gray-yellow cat of Pope Leo XII, born in the Raphael Loggia of the Vatican. Deeply fond of her, he wrote:

“Some creatures of God still remain in disfavor among humans. I would gladly be their advocate. Among the first deserving my defense are the donkey and the cat. I most love in cats their independent character, which borders on ingratitude and enables them to depend on no one; their detachment, which lets them climb from salons back to their native rooftops. The cat lives alone, needs no company, obeys only when it pleases, feigns sleep in order to observe more keenly, and scratches whatever it can. Buffon mistreated the cat; I work for its rehabilitation and hope to make it a respected animal.”

Today, past cruelties seem unbelievable. Only faint idioms remain as reminders of former barbarity. “Avoir d’autres chats à fouetter” (to have other cats to whip) means “I have other worries.” Likewise, for something unworthy of mention, one says: “Il n’y a pas de quoi fouetter un chat” (not enough to bother whipping a cat).

Friends of Science and Sensual Delight

“Friends of learning and of sensual delight” — that is how Charles Baudelaire (1821–1867), one of the key founders of modern poetry, described cats:

LES CHATS

Les amoureux fervents et les savants austères
Aiment également dans leur mûre saison
Les chats puissants et doux, orgueil de la maison,
Qui comme eux sont frileux et comme eux sédentaires.

Amis de la science et de la volupté,
Ils cherchent le silence et l’horreur des ténèbres;
L’Erèbe les eût pris pour ses coursiers funèbres,
S’ils pouvaient au servage incliner leur fierté.

Ils prennent en songeant les nobles attitudes
Des grands sphinx allongés au fond des solitudes,
Qui semblent s’endormir dans un rêve sans fin;

Leurs reins féconds sont pleins d’étincelles magiques,
Et des parcelles d’or, ainsi qu’un sable fin,
Étoilent vaguement leurs prunelles mystiques.

(Translation at the end of the text)

Baudelaire, a poet and lover of all things subtle, who forever sought beauty within the sober reality of daily life, understood the cat and found inspiration in it. Is the cat not, in truth, much like the poet himself—something unique?

Aware of the mystery of beauty and form, the cat seems to draw a magical circle around itself, which it traverses with nobility and ceremony, yet unpredictably. Its sphinx-like gaze resembles a dream without end. Does it not appear, like the poet, touched by some otherworldly force?

Upon the strings of my soul she let
A different bow, so full of fire and life,
Set trembling the finest chords—
None played as regally as she.

Baudelaire is said to have always asked, upon entering any home to which he had been invited, for the cat of the house first. Restless until he found it, he would take it into his arms, kiss it, and pet it, giving no attention to the other guests.

The refinement of art and lifestyle for which the French are famed has also been adopted by the French cat. Its enigmatic character allows both lovers and scholars to see in it a kindred spirit. The Burgundian kings sensed this long ago: their coat of arms, adorned with a cat, bore the inscription “All through love, nothing by force.”

Naturally, the transformation from “Beelzebub” to “Minette” occurred only gradually from the Renaissance onward. Yet signs of a profound shift in sentiment slowly multiplied. As early as 1558, Joachim du Bellay wrote a memorial poem for his deceased kitten. In the following century, the first Angora cat was brought from the East.

Soon afterward, newspapers and bulletins began to feature the first missing-cat notices. To which famous

animal, one wonders, was the medallion—still kept in the Bibliothèque Nationale—dedicated? Despite research, it cannot be definitively identified. It reads: “Black Tom I, born 1725,” and on the reverse appears an unsurpassable summary of this noble creature’s character:

I know whom I please.
I know my worth.

Still, cat opponents remained numerous. King Henry III fainted at the sight of a cat, and those around him did everything possible to prevent even a glimpse of one. Competing for his favor, courtiers tried to outdo one another in displays of feline hostility.

Even physicians and zoologists, from whom one would expect a more objective judgment, clung to old suspicions. The surgeon Ambroise Paré declared the cat’s brain, fur, and breath to be poisonous and attributed secret destructive powers to its gaze. Flourens (1794–1867) denied it any character at all. Gervais, in his zoological manual, was more precise:
“With difficulty is the confidence of a cat won, and never is it wholly given.”

Buffon, the renowned naturalist of the 18th century, wrote:
“Very different from the faithful dog, whose feelings are entirely devoted to his master, the cat seems to feel only for itself, to think only of itself, to love man only conditionally, and to stay in his company for selfish advantage.”

He saw only falsehood and malice in the cat and believed he had proven his point by claiming that cats never look one directly in the eye. Where others perceived mystery, he perceived lack. Unwilling to appreciate the cat for the unique being it is, he sought only confirmation of his own prejudice. Champfleury put it best:
“Only sensitive souls understand the cat; coarse people will always misjudge it.”

“Friends of science”? — Voltaire disagreed. The apostle of tolerance found the love many people had for cats ridiculous. Prosper Crébillon, envious because Voltaire had snatched the laurel wreath from his head, found no better revenge than to name his quarrelsome, misanthropic cat “Voltaire” and beat it daily. “I never strike any animal,” Crébillon said to a visitor, “but when I beat this cat, I feel as if I were beating Voltaire — and it does me good!”

“Friends of sensual delight” — here the cat gained recognition most quickly. Marie Duplessis, the famed “Lady of the Camellias,” always gave her heart to the admirer who brought her the most beautiful cats. And, indeed, she often found the newest cat lovelier than any of those she already owned…

François-René de Chateaubriand und Micetto

Muse of the Poets

One of the most famous artists' and poets' circles on Montmartre at the beginning of the century was the *Club du Chat Noir*. Its founder, Rodolphe Salis, had once taken in a stray black tomcat and immediately made him the patron of the literary circle. Countless plays, chansons, and poems were created within this group. Who the true chairman was is hard to say—Salis or the black tomcat who peacefully presided over every gathering.

The cat undeniably possesses something inspiring, and for many poets it served as the mysterious muse that whispered poetic thoughts into their minds. When one speaks of "poets and cats" in France, one naturally thinks first of Colette. Who does not know the inexhaustible stories of this charming narrator? In her remarkably sensitive dialogues between animals, we meet Kiki-la-Doucette, and even in her novels, the cat's role is never truly passive. Through the cats, the fates of the human characters—their love and their conflicts—are revealed. And reading what Colette wrote about her own beloved cats leaves no doubt about her devotion:

"The swallows were already drinking from the washbasin and snatching at mayflies when my little household set out. The usual late-afternoon scent hung in the air, and the sun, lingering on its slow descent, still burned warmly. But it could not deceive me; I fade with the day.

And near the end of every day, my cat, twining herself around my ankles, urges me to celebrate the coming of night with her.

She is my third cat—if among toms and queens I count only those who were true personalities, unforgettable ones.

Will my wonder at animals ever be reverent enough? She is unique, like the friend one can never replace, like a lover without flaw. Whence comes her love for me? On her own, she has attuned her steps to mine, and the invisible bond between us demanded collar and leash. She received both and accepted them with a sigh of satisfaction: *'Finally!'*
At the slightest sorrow, her tiny, narrow, delicate face pales and ages, the golden eyes sinking into a bluish shadow. Like the perfect lover, she shies from insistent touch. I will say no more. All else is silence, loyalty—experiences of the soul, the azure shadow of a form upon blue paper, which absorbs everything I write; the soundless gliding of wet silver paws.

After her—far after her—comes the tom, her splendid mate, all beauty and strength, shy as a Hercules. Then come all the others, those who fly, crawl, scratch."

Prosper Mérimée (1803–1870) also felt more than mere affection for his cat; theirs was a genuine, deep friendship. One can easily understand Mérimée's love for the graceful animal if one considers the precision of his style, the subtlety and delicate atmosphere of his novellas.

Night after night, the cat kept vigil with the author, confidently strolling among books and manuscripts. Mérimée expressed his attachment in a portrait he carefully drew of her. Though no masterpiece, each stroke —seeking to capture the gentle shine of her fur—testifies to the poet's love.

Cats feel at home among books and papers, in the silence of the study. Why not make them guardians of the bookshelf—or of an entire library? Anatole France (1844–1924), one of the early Nobel laureates, often reminded of bedtime by the conspicuous scratching of his cat, elaborated on this idea in a long poem.

In the same century, the philosopher and literary critic Hippolyte Taine owned not just one cat but many. He dedicated twelve sonnets in November 1883 to Puss, Ebène, and Mitonne. These cats were not toys for him; he integrated them into his worldview. A man who measured both people and works of art by their intellectual substance could not fail to notice the wisdom contained in a cat's gentle behavior. Without effort, the cat achieves happiness—a stark contrast to the turbulent joys and sorrows of human beings. Taine must have pondered their characters deeply. To live in serenity, beyond sorrow and delight, as they did, was his aim. "I have studied philosophers, and I have studied cats," he wrote, "but the wisdom of cats is far greater."

Taine was not alone in this insight. As early as 1792, Jean Pierre Claris de Florian urged people in one of his fables not to overthink life. The cat, he said, should be our example.

When a cat sees its reflection in a mirror, it is initially startled and fascinated. It jumps back and forth, trying to determine the nature of its double. But after the third failed attempt, it gives up. Why struggle to explain the inexplicable?

LE CHAT ET LE MIROIR

Philosophes hardis, qui passez votre vie
A vouloir expliquer ce qu'on n'explique pas,
Daignez écouter, je vous prie,
Ce trait du plus sage des chats.
Sur une table de toilette
Le chat aperçut un miroir:
Il y saute, regarde, et d'abord pense voir
Un de ses frères qui le guette.
Notre chat veut le joindre, il se trouve arrêté.
Surpris, il juge alors la glace transparente,
Et passe de l"autre côté,
Ne trouve rien, revient, et le chat se présente;
Il réfléchit un peu, de peur que l'animal,
Tandis qu'il fait le tour, ne sorte.
Sur le haut du miroir, il se met à cheval,
Une patte par-ci, l'autre par-là; de la sorte,
Partout il pourra le saisir.
Alors, croyant bien le tenir,
Doucement vers la glace il incline la tête,
Aperçoit une oreille, puis deux A l'instant,
A droite, à gauche, il va jetant
Sa griffe qu°il tient toute prête;
Mais il perd Péquilibre, il tombe et n'a rien pris.
Alors sans davantage attendre,
Sans chercher plus longtemps ce qu'il ne peut comprendre,
Il laisse le miroir et retourne aux souris.
Que m"importe, dit-il, de percer ce mystère?

Une chose que notre esprit
Après un long travail, n'entend ni ne saisit,
Ne nous est jamais nécessaire.

(Translation at the end of the text)

Charles Baudelaire

The Poet's Cat

Montaigne was the first in France to break the medieval silence surrounding the cat. Countless poets followed him. It is impossible to name them all or to let each speak here. Fernand Méry, in his remarkable book *Le chat, sa vie, son histoire, sa magie*, provides the most complete compilation of French poets who revered cats. Saint-Beuve, Victor Hugo, Lemaître, Balzac, Zola, Cocteau—the list of illustrious names seems endless. A few more shall be mentioned here.

Théophile Gautier (1811–1872) rhapsodized about feline friendship in these words:

"...To win the friendship of a cat is a difficult thing. Such an animal is philosophical, foreign, quiet, attached to its habits, loves order and cleanliness, and does not let its affection grow unchecked. It will gladly be your friend, if you prove worthy, but never your slave. Despite all its tenderness, it keeps its own opinion and will do nothing for you that it finds unreasonable. But once it has given itself to you—what trust without reserve, what persistence of affection! It becomes your companion in hours of solitude, reflection, and work. It will spend whole evenings on your knee, spinning its thread, happy to be near you, indifferent to the society of its own kind.
In vain the meowing from the rooftops calls it to evening gatherings where there is no tea but sour herring brine; it will not yield to temptation and will prolong its spinning session with you. If you set it on the floor, it quickly climbs back to its place, purring softly in gentle reproach. Upright before you, it sometimes looks into your eyes

with a gaze so full and steady, so firm and tender, so ingratiating and so human that one is almost startled—it seems impossible that such eyes do not speak with living thought."

Gautier's beloved cat was named Séraphita. One scene illustrates how deeply he cared for her: Gautier once received a visit from the then-unknown composer Massenet, who wished to set one of Gautier's poems to music. Despite all his passionate persuasion, Gautier remained skeptical and unmoved. But during the conversation, Séraphita quietly emerged from hiding and politely rubbed against Massenet's leg. Being a great animal lover, he took the cat onto his lap and stroked her. That decided everything. Could Gautier refuse his approval to a young man whom Séraphita had already chosen as a friend? Determined, he went to his bookshelf and returned with a slender volume titled *The Pied Piper*, which he handed to the composer.

Not merely a friend but a goddess—that is what Stéphane Mallarmé (1842–1898) called his cat. He saw in her the same perfection he sought through his crystalline poetry. Lilith was the tutelary spirit of his home and study, joining in silence the many famed artistic evenings hosted there. However spirited and dazzling the poets' words became, Lilith never lost her serenity or independence. When the famous Whistler attempted to paint her one evening, she slipped under the divan before he had even wetted his brushes.

Alfred Ruffin, the popular poet, dedicated two entire collections of cat poems to the dear companions who

filled his days with delightful antics and soothing presence. He wrote while they lay purring on his desk. If ever he dallied or lost focus, a stern glance quickly fell upon him—and delighted by this quiet supervision, he returned to his work. Even on the day when his precious Chinese vase shattered, he could not remain sorrowful. For there now sat the cat on the pedestal, a creature worthy of the ancient porcelain. Her exotic patterned coat rivaled all the colors of the ceramic, and not even a mandarin from the Middle Kingdom could have competed with her. Was she not even more precious? She was alive—and sturdy.

Pierre Loti (1850–1923) was not content with having two marvelous professions—that of naval officer and of writer. Proudly he announced his third: "Friend, secretary, and confidant of cats." When he commanded the steamer *Vautour* in 1904, he hosted a grand celebration in Constantinople to mark the birth of a kitten. The ship was festooned with flowers, the officers assembled a small orchestra, and under the direction of the embassy secretary they performed Romberg's *Burlesque Symphony*. At the height of the festivities, the tiny ball of fur was baptized before a decorated altar with the name Belkis.

Cats brought not only joy but also pain to poets. When Jean-Jacques Rousseau fled to Switzerland on June 9,

1762—after the condemnation of *Émile* by the Parliament of Paris—he was heartbroken to leave his beloved Minette in the care of the Marquise de Verdelin. Nothing could ever repair that loss; his correspondence bears witness to it.

Naturally, La Fontaine also turned to the cat. He owned a small Minette whose memory never left him. She had chosen to bring her kittens into the folds of his ceremonial robe when it had fallen to the floor. As it was his only respectable outfit, La Fontaine found himself in great embarrassment the next day when Fouquet invited him to dinner…

In his fables, however, pedagogy—the moral lesson—takes precedence. This concerned La Fontaine, as well as Aesop before him, more than the animals' true nature. La Fontaine's most famous cat fable, inspired by Aesop's "The Cat in Love," tells of a man who adored his cat so deeply that he wept with desire. He finally persuaded the gods to transform her into a woman and married her the same day. But bliss was short-lived. A tiny gray mouse appeared—an irresistible force—and the cat-woman instantly leapt after it.

A happier transformation appears in Madame d'Aulnoy's fairy tale *La Chatte Blanche*. Blanchette lived in an enchanted castle. A prince, riding on a wooden horse, broke the spell. Blanchette rose from the ground "like the sun breaking through clouds," transforming into a young woman.

Her blond hair fell in heavy curls to her feet, her head was crowned with flowers, and her gown of light white silk was adorned with taffeta roses.

From France also comes the ancestor of Puss in Boots, Tomcat Murr, and all their kin: the *chat botté* of Charles Perrault in *Mother Goose Tales*. This clever cat, whose wit knew no bounds, helped the miller's son overcome every obstacle and win a princess.

We cannot end this chapter on France's cat-loving poets without honoring the "Cat Father of Paris," Paul Léautaud. This self-styled "anti-literary writer," who called all contemporary authors "zeros, absolute zeros," lived in a dilapidated hut on the outskirts of Paris with thirty-eight cats, twenty-two dogs, a white goat, and a goose named Aurel. The grove surrounding the house became a cemetery: 300 cats and 150 dogs were buried there—450 animals Léautaud considered his life's purpose, the only beings that ever stirred real affection in him. There were no gravestones, but Léautaud knew the exact resting place and life dates of each animal.

He often said he practiced literature only to earn money for animal food. He once asked himself: "What is more important? The health of my cat Boule or the Prix Goncourt?"
His answer: "No hesitation—the health of my cat Boule!"

Apollinaire expressed the cat's gift best in a stanza of simple truth:

I wish in my house
A woman of good sense,
A cat among my books,
And friends at all times.
Without these, I cannot live.

Colette und Kiki-la-Doucette

The Breaker of Sorrows

Not only artists feel their hearts softened by the French cat. It is a source of calm and cheerfulness for the combative politician as well as for the relentlessly working scientist. No matter how great the workload, no matter how many troubles or difficulties cast a dark veil over the day—the cat remains the same: harmonious, joyful, and full of life. Who has not sought its friendship in difficult moments?

Thus we find a passionate love of cats where we might least expect it. Few of his contemporaries would have imagined that Cardinal Richelieu, the feared minister of Louis XIII, was an ardent cat lover who maintained an entire cat dormitory with twelve feline residents next to his study. Two servants, charged with caring for them, had the daily duty of cutting their white chicken meat into small pieces. And the same man whose iron will resolved France's religious turmoil and paved the way for absolutism—before whom politicians and vassals trembled—could, in his free hours, forget time and place entirely while playing with his beloved cats.

Two of these cats had been born in the wig of his absent-minded friend Racan, a scatterbrained academician. This curious accident inspired many anecdotes. One story claims that Racan, deep in thought, placed the wig—complete with the two kittens—upon his own head, realizing the truth only later during a conversation with the cardinal, when he found himself continually scratching his scalp.

Richelieu remembered his cats even on his deathbed. He granted each of them, as well as the two servants, a modest pension in his will. But their good fortune ended with the cardinal's last breath. Not long afterward, several Swiss drummers—brutally pragmatic men—managed to capture all twelve heirs in one swoop and served them at the Hôtel du Boudin Généraux as the midday meal…

Misfortune also befell the cat of the Marquis de Farras, the first aristocrat executed during the French Revolution. This last aristocratic cat was inconsolable after losing her master. Wandering in sorrow, she searched for his grave, found it, dug into the earth, and let out heartrending cries. A staunch Jacobin happened to hear the noise, seized the cat, and brought her to prison. When the case became known, the mob demanded her execution. A tribunal "convicted" the helpless creature of "restorationist intentions" and "aristocratic activities" and condemned her to death by hanging. Before 5,000 cheering spectators, the sentence was carried out.

Dictators rarely favor cats. Most have even despised them. Genghis Khan, Caesar, Alexander the Great, Philip II—they all mistrusted the independence of cats, preferring obedient, submissive dogs. Napoleon—though a dictator—was the exception. He loved cats, which caused frequent quarrels with his wife Josephine, who adored dogs. Once, in Malmaison, the two favorite animals clashed in a fierce fight. Josephine wanted to call the servants, but Napoleon commanded silence:

“Madame, you have always wondered whose power is greater—yours or mine. Let the animals decide!”
The cat won. The dog fled in tears. Napoleon smiled with satisfaction. Josephine demanded a rematch, but Bonaparte replied:
“On the battlefield, there is no rematch!”

In 1810, a cat exhibition was held in Paris in Napoleon’s honor. The most beautiful tomcat was to receive the name “Napoleon.” But the judges could not agree. The emperor was asked to choose between the final two candidates. While Napoleon admired the magnificent creatures, one suddenly leapt at the face of the police minister Fouché, injuring him badly. The guards rushed to kill the cat, but Napoleon stopped them:
“Whoever has the courage to stand up to my police minister is bold and brave. He deserves to bear the name Napoleon.”

Napoleon had less patience, however, with the cats of Madame Soult, wife of the great tactician and Marshal Soult. In 1814, Napoleon asked Soult to assume command of the entire French army. Soult replied anxiously: “Sire, if the cat permits!” Soult was a notorious henpecked husband; for every decision he needed his wife’s approval, and she in turn asked her cat—an animal the marshal hated profoundly. The same had occurred in 1808 when Soult led the armies in Spain and Portugal. He won brilliant victories, and when Paris discovered that a cat’s approval was required for Soult to hold command, cats became fashionable among military men.

Soult himself received eighteen cats as gifts and was relieved when his wife gave them away. He would gladly have banished her favorite cat to the ends of the earth.

Raymond Poincaré, President of the Republic from 1913 to 1920, owned a gray Angora named Gris-Gris. When he moved into the Élysée Palace, Gris-Gris moved with him. In his memoirs, the cat occupies her rightful place. With great affection, Poincaré writes in volume eight: "Gris-Gris has wit, is full of vitality, amusing, affectionate, and escapes the most serious situations with a perfect pirouette."

Le Bovier de Fontenelle made it a rule to recite every speech first to his cat. If the cat did not listen attentively from beginning to end, the speech was rewritten. When Clémenceau traveled to the Allies' conference in England in 1919, the very first thing he did in London was buy a black Persian cat, which he named Prudence—"Caution." She was to be his good-luck charm, and indeed, she did not disappoint him.

Club du Chat Noir (Montmartre)

Irreplaceable Cat

How essential cats were — and still are — to France becomes clear from the fact that *twice* a cat saved the French state.

The first time was during the defection of the city of Arras in 1477. After the death of Charles the Bold, the city refused to pledge allegiance to the new king, Louis XI. "The king will command Arras when the rats eat the cats," the mayor reportedly sent to Paris. The French besieged the rebellious city until it finally surrendered. An engraving depicting the fall of Arras shows a cat wearing a ruffled collar and boots, triumphantly holding a scepter while surrounded by a swarm of mice. The inscription reads:

"The French have conquered Arras — but the rats still do not eat cats."

The second state-saving cat was General Le Chat. Henry IV sent him against two rebellious dukes — Mercoeur and Mayenne — who refused to follow the king's example and convert to Catholicism. The king mocked them as "the late ones." The dukes avoided open battle and kept their distance. One night, the two armies camped so near each other that the rebels attempted to undermine the morale of their opponents. They had a giant painting made of a sleeping cat, secretly placed it at the enemy camp, and wrote beneath it:

"A cat that dreams and sleeps, but never bites!"

Le Chat did not lose his composure. He simply had a large, fat mouse painted on the reverse side with the inscription:

“A sleeping cat should not be awakened!”
At dawn, the dukes found this new picture standing directly before their tents. Enraged, they immediately launched an attack — and suffered a devastating defeat. Tradition claims that this event gave birth to the proverb “Let sleeping cats lie.”

In quieter ways, too, cats rendered valuable, almost government-level service. No matter what methods people invented against mice and rats, none matched the natural effectiveness of the cat. Thus, in France, the cat is far more than decoration; it performs a necessary duty. Books in libraries remain intact, food in silos and storage rooms is spared, and disease and infestation are kept at bay.

After the International Rat Congress in Paris and Le Havre, an International League Against Rats was founded, and A. Loir established the Club of Rat-Catching Cats in Normandy. Only cats with proven talent in rat hunting may join. The best can kill 30 to 40 rats per week.

In Colbert’s time, no ship was permitted to sail unless at least two cats were on board — explicitly noted in the ship’s papers. Without them, the captain was held personally responsible for any damage caused by rats in the cargo.

It is impossible to list all the places where cats serve indispensable roles today. In seaports and large markets, in the stores of the navy and army, with the police, and even at the Quai d’Orsay — everywhere a corps of cats is stationed.

The National Library officially lists only one cat in its inventory, charged with protecting millions of books and entitled to an annual "salary" of 30 francs in sausage scraps and milk rolls. In reality, 25 cats work diligently there, cared for and fed by the staff.

Even private cat owners benefit enormously from their pets — sometimes in surprisingly direct ways. One pensioner in Versailles, named Flamand, returned home late one night. His cat ran toward him in visible agitation, her fur bristling, eyes blazing. Wondering what troubled her, Flamand sat on his bed and tried to calm her with words and petting. But she remained distressed, then suddenly leapt to the floor. When he bent down, he saw beneath the bed the foot of a stranger hiding there. Keeping his composure, Flamand said soothingly to his cat:
"Come now, my little friend. I locked you in far too long — you must be hungry."
He left the room with her, quietly locked the door, and alerted the police.

Paris has two faces — one of splendor and one of hidden misery. The same is true for the cats of Paris. On one side stand the headquarters of the rival cat clubs (Cat Club de France, Cat Club de Paris, Club des Amis des Chats); here cat congresses and exhibitions — dating back to 1896 but flourishing from 1925 onward — draw large and enthusiastic audiences. Paris is also home to important feline journals such as *Le Chat Beauté*, *Quatre Pattes*, and *Revue féline*.

On the other side lies the Paris of abandoned cats — the *kitchen-bin cats*, as they are called — who survive year-round from garbage scraps and know nothing in life but blows and curses. Jean Cocteau felt deep, hidden affection for these proletarian cats and dedicated many of his drawings to them.

Spoiled cats in luxury apartments bear names such as Barbarossa, Misouchi, Nitouche, Bikini, or Madame Coquette. In working-class districts, the cat is usually called Minette or Minou, though every affectionate nickname imaginable is used. A Swiss student once wrote in her diary:
"While staying in a cheap suburban hotel, I was awakened every morning by the landlady sweetly calling into the courtyard: 'Come, my little chicken, come!' Curious to see the runaway child, I leaned out the window — only to discover that the tender words were addressed to an adorable tiger-striped tomcat returning from nightly rooftop adventures. I could only smile, thinking the little rascal would surely have preferred a real chicken to his nickname."

Kardinal Richelieu und seine Katzen

Who Could Forget You?

In France, even dead cats have monuments.
The Countess of Lesdiguières had a white mausoleum built in the garden of her villa for her cat Ménine. On the black marble sarcophagus sits a statue of a black cat. Beneath it, the inscription reads:

Ci git une chatte jolie,
La maîtresse qui n'aima rien
N'aima jusqu'à la folie;
Pourquoi le dire? On le voit bien!

Countless suitors had sought the hand of the countess. She rejected them all. Everyone envied the cat for its privileged position. But even Ménine knew no lover. She remained a maiden until her death, giving her affection to no one but her mistress.

Every visitor to Paris is advised to see the animal cemetery of Asnières, located on the Île des Ravageurs in the Seine. It is truly worth the visit. On this quiet island, washed on both sides by the gray-green waters, lie in peaceful repose creatures that were often bitter enemies in life: dogs and cats. Many touching and splendid gravestones reveal the happiness a cat brought into a person's life.

One grave reads:

Our good little Pompon
who loved us so much
We will never forget you.

Another says:

To Caty
To you, who for so long
were my faithful companion,
I keep in my heart
your immortal image.

And on a third:

MOPSIK 1926–1938

Dear little Mopsik,
so brave and affectionate,
so faithful and so much better than we,
to reward you for all the treasures
of your tender and noble heart,
we had you put to sleep!
Because old and ill,
you suffered,
and we suffered with you.
Dear Mopsik,
forgive your unworthy masters!
Their grief is endless.
They will never forget you!

One also finds English, German, Russian, even Latin inscriptions. Burials occur daily; one often sees the "relatives" of deceased cats placing fresh flowers on graves even after twenty years, then standing quietly in contemplation.
The cemetery was founded in 1839 by Madame Marguerite Durant and Count Alexandre Dumas. Since then, 42,000 people have laid their beloved companions to rest there.

Friedhof von Asnières

Translations

Georges Brassens (Brave Margot)
(Translator: Sabine Ibach)

When Margot unfastened her bodice
to give her kitten suck,
all the boys, all the boys of the village
were there, la la la la,
were there, la la la la.
And Margot, simple and innocent, thought
they had all come
to look at her kitten —
all the boys, all the boys of the village
were there, la la la la,
were there, la la la la…

Baudelaire: *Les Chats*
(Translator: Stefan George)

Passionate lovers and austere scholars
admire, when their season of ripeness comes,
the cats — gentle and strong, pride of the house —
who, like them, love warmth and keep to their rooms.

Friends of knowledge and of sensual delight,
they seek out silence and the horror of night.
Hades himself would have taken them
for his funeral steeds,
had their proud spirit allowed servitude.

In dreaming they assume the noble postures
of the great sphinxes stretched out in deserts,
seeming to fall asleep in a dream without end.

Their supple loins are full of magic sparks,
and grains of gold — like the finest sand —
faintly star their enigmatic eyes.

Florian: *The Cat and the Mirror*
(Translator: Sabine Ibach)

Bold philosophers who spend your life
seeking explanations where none can be found,
I ask you: listen to this tale
of the wisest of all tomcats.

Upon a dressing table the cat
caught sight of a mirror,
leapt toward it, and first believed
he saw a brother lying in wait.

Our cat wanted to join him,
but found himself blocked.
Surprised, he judged the glass transparent
and walked around it.
He found nothing, returned —
and there was the cat again.

He pondered a bit, afraid
the creature might escape
while he circled the mirror.
So he climbed astride it,
one paw on each side,
thinking he would catch him there.

Certain he would seize him,
he leaned toward the mirror,
saw one ear — then two —
and instantly struck
right and left with ready claws.
But he lost his balance,
fell, and caught nothing.

He waited no longer,
searched no more for what
he could not understand,
left the mirror behind
and returned to the mice.

“What does it matter,” he said,
“to unravel this mystery?
A thing our mind cannot grasp
after long labor
is surely of no use to us.”

For your notes

For your notes

Cat Man (Booklet's)